

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 TUNIS 04100 291054Z

71

ACTION NEA-16

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R 291010Z JUN 74

FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6012

INFO AMEMBASSY RABAT

USNIT ALGIERS 2390

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

AMEMBASSY ROME

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 4100

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, TS

SUBJ: DIPLOMATIC CONSENSUS REGARDING RECENT
TUNISIAN DEVELOPMENTS

REF: TUNIS 3695, 3484, 3458 (ALL NOTAL)

1. SUMMARY: SEPARATE TALKS WITH FOUR WELL-INFORMED
AMBASSADORS LEADS TO CONCLUSION THAT: (1) CONFRONTATION
BETWEEN PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA AND PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA DID
INDEED OCCUR; (2) WHILE PRIME MINISTER HAS BEEN "FORGIVEN"
AND IS BACK IN BUSINESS, HIS POSITION MAY HAVE BEEN WEAKENED;
(3) PM'S ILLNESS WAS PHYCOSOMATIC (WHICH EXACERBATED AN
EXISTING AILMENT) ARISING OUT OF BOURGUIBA'S OUTBURST, BUT
BECAME CONVENIENT PRETEXT FOR CANCELLATION OF CHINA VISIT;
(4) LATTER CANCELLED ESSENTIALLY BECAUSE CHINESE COULD NOT
PROMISE MEETING BETWEEN BOURGUIBA AND CHOU-EN-LAI AND
BOURGUIBA'S DOCTORS OBJECTED TO HECTIC NATURE OF
TRIP; AND (5) MASMOUDI'S STAR IS ONCE AGAIN RISING,
PARTY CONGRESS SCHEDULED FOR SEPTEMBER 12 AND PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTIONS FOR NOVEMBER 3. GOT BELIEVES BOURGUIBA ENTITLED
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 TUNIS 04100 291054Z

BY CONSTITUTION TO RUN AGAIN. END SUMMARY.

2. IN COURSE OF SEPARATE MEETINGS SINCE MY RETURN WITH LEVANESE, FRENCH, TURKISH AND ITALIAN AMBASSADORS, FOLLOWING CONSENSUS EMERGES REGARDING EVENTS THAT OCCURRED IN TUNISIA DURING MY ABSENCE. THIS COLLECTIVE ASSESSMENT PRETTY MUCH SUBSTANTIATES REPORTS ALREADY PROVIDED BY EMBASSY (REFTELS).

3. THERE WAS INDEED A VIGOROUS VERBAL EXCHANGE BETWEEN PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA AND PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA BEFORE A COUNCIL OF MINISTERS' MEETING SOME WEEKS AGO, FOLLOWING INCIDENT IN WHICH PRESIDENT WAS MET BY PETITIONERS EVIDENTLY OBJECTING TO THEIR UNEMPLOYMENT AND RISING COST OF LIVING. FOLLOWING THIS INCIDENT PRESIDENT LIT NOT ONLY INTO PRIME MINISTER, BUT ALSO MINISTER OF ECONOMY AYARI. ONE REPORT IS THAT PRESIDENT'S OUTBURST OCCURRED ON SIDEWALK OUTSIDE PRIME MINISTRY AND WAS FOLLOWED BY ONE HOUR OF FURTHER DRESSING DOWN IN PM'S OFFICE. INCIDENT PRECIPITATED PM'S ILLNESS WHICH WAS PROBABLY MORE SERIOUS THAN "DIPLOMATIC" INDISPOSITION.

4. SHORTLY AFTER CONFRONTATION AND WHILE PM WAS RESTING AT HOME, PRESIDENT, ACCOMPANIED BY HASSAN BELKHODJA AND OTHER OFFICIALS, DROPPED IN TO SEE HIM TO MAKE AMENDS. SINCE PRIME MINISTER HAD EITHER ANNOUNCED HIS INTENTION TO RESIGN OR WAS CONTEMPLATING DOING SO, BOURGUIBA VISIT APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN A MOVE TO PLACATE PM AND PERSUADE HIM TO STAY ON. AFTERWARDS PM WENT TO EUROPE FOR FURTHER REST.

5. SOME OBSERVERS FEEL THAT THE PM'S DAYS ARE NOW NUMBERED AND THAT WHILE HE IS LIKELY TO BE KEPT THROUGH THE PARTY CONGRESS MEETING NEXT FALL, HE COULD BE REPLACED AFTER THAT. OTHERS CONSIDER HIM IRREPLACEABLE UNLESS MASMOUDI IS REHABILITATED AND RETURNS -- IN WHICH CASE PM WOULD CERTAINLY REFUSE TO CONTINUE AND, IN OPINION OF ONE AMBASSADOR, MIGHT BE REPLACED BY MASMOUDI. THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR REMARKED THAT THERE ARE RUMORS THAT BAH LADGHAM MIGHT EVEN BE BROUGHT BACK OUT OF DOGHOUSE TO BECOME PRIME MINISTER AFTER CONGRESS MEETING. OTHERS CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 TUNIS 04100 291054Z

BELIEVE THAT LADGHAM IS TOO PERSONNA NON GRATA WITH BOURGUIBA FOR THIS TO HAPPEN.

6. FRENCH AMBASSADOR HAD ALSO HEARD RUMORS THAT MASMOUDI HAD QUIETLY VISITED TUNISIA RECENTLY, BUT HE HAD NO CONFIRMATION. CONSENSUS SEEMS TO BE THAT, IN ANY CASE, PRESIDENT HAS BEEN IN TOUCH WITH MASMOUDI OVER PAST COUPLE OF MONTHS AND IS KEEPING HIS OPTIONS OPEN RE BRINGING HIM

BACK. NOTEWORTHY IS FACT THAT PRESIDENT HAS REPORTEDLY QUASHED FURTHER HEARINGS OF COMMISSION OF INQUIRY, SET UP TO INDICT MASMOUDI. AT LEAST ONE AMBASSADOR BELIEVES WASILA BOURGUIBA IS ONCE MORE IN CAHOOTS WITH MASMOUDI, AND IS STRONGLY INFLUENCING BOURGUIBA IN HIS RELATIONS WITH THE FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER.

6. CANCELLATION OF THE PRESIDENT'S VISIT TO CHINA IS BELIEVED TO HAVE FLOWED FROM A NUMBER OF FACTORS, INCLUDING MAINLY: (1) INABILITY OF CHINESE GOVERNMENT TO GUARANTEE A MEETING FOR BOURGUIBA WITH CHOU-EN-LAI AND (2) STRONG OBJECTIONS OF PRESIDENT'S DOCTORS WHO ARGUED THAT SUCH A TRIP WOULD HAVE SERIOUS ADVERSE EFFECTS ON PRESIDENT'S HEALTH. (TURKISH AMBASSADOR TELLS ME THAT ONE DOCTOR ESTIMATED THAT IF PRESIDENT MADE TRIP TO CHINA HE MIGHT HAVE DIED WHILE EN VOYAGE OR SHORTLY AFTER RETURN.)

7. MEANWH LE, MINISTER SAYAH HAS TOLD ITALIAN AMBASSADOR THAT OPENING OF PARTY CONGRESS WILL BE POSTPONED UNTIL SEPTEMBER 12 TO PERMIT BOURGUIBA FEW DAYS OF REST FOLLOWING RABAT SUMMIT MEETING SCHEDULED FOR SEPTEMBER 3. SAYAH ALSO SAID THAT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD ON NOVEMBER 3, WITH ESTABLISHMENT CONFIDENT THAT BOURGUIBA HAS CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO RUN AGAIN. BASIS FOR THIS IS INTERPRETATION THAT THREE-TERM LIMITATION IMPOSED ON NUMBER OF PRESIDENTIAL TERMS BY ARTICLE 40 APPLIES TO "RE-ELECTION" NOT "ELECTION."

8. COMMENT: TUNISIAN SHIP OF STATE APPEARS AT TIMES TO BE RUDDERLESS. BOURGUIBA CONTINUES TO MANIFEST ERRATICISM, ALTHOUGH HIS PRESIDING OVER LAST THREE WEEKLY COUNCIL OF MINISTERS' MEETINGS SUGGESTS HE ENDEAVORING
CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 04 TUNIS 04100 291054Z

TO EXERCISE A STEADYING INFLUENCE. PRIME MINISTER, WHO HAD GAINED STRENGTH AND STATURE AFTER ABORTIVE JERBA DECLARATION, MAY HAVE BEEN WEAKENED. WHAT MAY SAVE HIM, HOWEVER, IS LACK OF ALTERNATIVE ACCEPTABLE TO BOURGUIBA. FOREIGN MINISTER CHATTI IS TURNING OUT TO BE AS PERIPATETIC AS MASMOUDI AND WITHOUT A DEPUTY TO KEEP THINGS MOVING AT THE MINISTRY AT HOMT. ONE AMBASSADOR HAS COMMENTED THAT AT LEAST EVERYONE KNEW WHAT MASMOUDI'S POLICIES WERE. CHATTI, ON OTHER HAND, SEEMS TO BE ALL THINGS TO ALL MEN. CURRENT PRINCIPAL FOREIGN POLICY THEME IS MAGHREBIAN UNITY, SYMBOLIZED BY BOURGUIBA'S CURRENT VISITS TO ALGIERS AND RABAT. WE UNDERSTAND THAT MAGHREB FOREIGN MINISTERS DUE TO MEET AT ALGIERS ON JULY 1 AND THAT MAGHREBIAN SUMMIT (TO WHICH QADHAFI IS TO BE INVITED) WILL FOLLOW.

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